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THE COST OF FORGIVENESS Matthew 18:21-35

The scripture lesson this morning deals with the question of forgiveness, one of the most crucial, and yet most misunderstood elements of the Christian Faith. Peter confronted our Lord with the question of how far a man ought to go in forgiving one who sins against him. Peter knew that throughout the Old Testament were scattered instructions on how to deal with a transgressor. He knew how the Lord had warned "If anyone slays Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him seven fold."[1] He knew the song of Lamech from the same fourth chapter of Genesis: "If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventyfold."[2] He was probably familiar with the words of the law: "Then if you walk contrary to me, and will not hearken to me, I will bring more plagues upon you, sevenfold as many as your sins."[3] He had heard the Rabbi's quote from the book of Job that God forgives men three times.[4] He knew the resounding words of the prophet Amos: "For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment."[5] He had heard the rabbis' teaching that a good jew was to forgive a transgressor three times. And so in a moment of magnanimity Peter suggested to Jesus that seven might be the appropriate number of times to forgive his brother. This was more than twice as much as was done by the best of Jews. To his question came the answer, not seven but seventy times seven.

The number here is unimportant. What Jesus meant was that forgiveness must be unlimited; that a disciple of his ought never to think

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[1]Genesis 4:15
[2]Genesis 4:24
[3]Leviticus 26:21
[4]Job 33:29
[5]Amos 2:6

about counting the times he has forgiven. He knew, however, that the same mentality that forgave three times and retalliated on the fourth offence would do some rapid mental arithmetic and conclude that 490 was now the outside limit on a man's forgiveness. Jesus knew that under the law men forgave three times; but all the while were anxiously awaiting the fourth offence that they might reap vengeance. He knew the self-righteousness men harbored as they fulfilled the law's require ments; and he knew how very far they were from understanding what he meant by forgiving not seven times but seven times seventy.

And so he went further; he told a parable. In that parable we see that forgiveness lies at the very heart of life; that no Christian life can be without it. We see also that forgiveness is not just a high sounding hypothesis, or a theory of interpersonal relations but a very real and concrete demand to do forgiveness, to be forgiving, to forgive as we have been forgiven. So basic and important is forgiveness that Jesus began his parable with a comparison to the Kingdom of God. There was a king who had a servant who owed him a huge sum of money. A talent was worth roughly one thousand dollars and so the total of the servant's indebtedness was about ten million dollars. When the king demanded payment and found his servant unable he ordered him sold into slavery. The servant begged indulgence, the king was moved and absolved him of the entire amount. But then the servant, meeting a fellow servant who owed him about twenty dollars, demanded payment, refused to wait, and had him thrown in prison. This act of callousness distressed the king and he retracted his original forgiveness, too took it back, and had the ungrateful servant thrown in prison until he could pay the debt. The parable is concluded with the warning,

"So also my heavenly father will do to you, if you do not forgive your brother from the heart."

Jesus' point is clear. The Kingdom of God is built on the continual flow of forgiveness; from king to servant and from servant to servant; from God to man, and from man to man. Like an electrical current, if the circuit is broken at any one point the power is shut off. In other words Divine forgiveness has meaning only when men forgive one another. Like the ungrateful servant who was thrown in jail--man can easily reject the forgiveness of God and thusly find himself on the outside of the Kingdom.

Forgiveness is more demand than suggestion; more action than passive; and forgiveness is not cheap. Forgiveness costs something of the man who would forgive--and of the man who seeks forgiveness. It asks not our words but our actions.

Today is Reformation Sunday, and I think it would be a good thing on this Sunday to consider the possibility that as Reformed Protestants, we have chopped away some elements ofRoman Catholicism that are essential to Christianity. One of these elements is confession--and forgiveness. Catholics and Protestants alike misunderstand much of Catholicism, and no where is this more true than in the practice of confession. We delight in castigating our Catholic brethren for confessing to a priest instead of God. But any good Catholic, layman or priest, will tell you that this is not what takes place in the confessional. The Christian is confessing to God, the priest is the intermediary and assigns the amount of penance needed for absolution. Now I don't agree with this, nor would I advise a Protestant return to the practice. The point I am trying

to make is that devout Catholics regularly confess their sins, and more than this they do something about it in acts of penance. O. H. Mowrer, in a recent article in Christian Century wrote "I am still looking (but doubt I'll ever find) for the guilty man who feels good without confessing and making amends."[6]

I don't think "feeling good" is the aim and purpose of confession, but the devout Catholic who seriously considers his relationship to God and fellowmen, and who feels guilty about his failings has the opportunity of telling someone about it--and then doing something about it. His personal guilt is absolved because he is doing something concrete to make amends. Amidst our jokes and scorn for the confessional we ought to be asking ourselves; precisely what does the Protestant church have to say about confession and forgiveness? If I am accurate in my estimate the average Protestant, or at least Presbyterian, would say the following. "We Protestants confess only to God. We don't believe in that stuff about confessing to a priest." Or a more sophisticated Protestant might say something like this "Our doctrine of sin goes deeper than petty rules and regulations like eating meat on Friday. When we confess we are more concerned with a deep wrongness inside." Unfortunately, this is as far as it goes. If pushed we can come up with something that sounds logical, but in actuality we avoid, at all costs, any real coming to grips with confession and forgiveness. We have so reacted against the institutional excesses of Rome that we have stripped the church completely of a very important and essential Christian practice. I grew up in a Presbyterian Church in Pennsylvania, where the recent appearance of a prayer of confession in the order of

[6]Mowrer, O. Hobart: "The Almighty's Unmighty Ministers", The Christian Century, Vol. LXXIX, No. 42; October 17, 1962, P 1254.

worship was interpreted, by many of the older members, as a definite move towards Catholicism.

As a result of this, the word forgiveness simply doesn't mean much at all to the average protestant. Granted our increasingly popular practice of confession within worship, we still have yet to come to grips with the basic nature of the act of forgiving--and with the essential fact that forgiveness is a costly commodity. We read the prescribed prayers, we listen to the words of pardon and that's it.

In the article that I've already mentioned, Mowrer is very critical of the ministry, and I would suppose the church, in this matter He accuses ministers of "dispensing Grace offhandedly," of blithely and irresponsibly assuring Christians of their forgivness, without ever seeing that the offence--and the guilt are honestly faced. He cites the case of a woman in a mental hospital, severly depressed, obviously suffering from unexpiated, and unrecognized guilt. Insisting that her sins were forgiven, that her minister had assured her that she was saved, she refused to think that there might be more to be said and done.[7] Here, according to Mowrer, the church not only has failed to deal with sin and guilt, but also by its irresponsible negligence was directly responsible for the patient's schizophrenia. In one summary statement he says "
he says "The clerical sin lies rather in the practice of assuring others, individually or collectivelyk or divine pardon in a quite premature and abortive way--of crying 'Peace, peace; when there is no peace' and when indeed there ought to be no peace."[8]

What, then, ought we to do? I think perhaps the soundest thing would be to reexamine this parable in the eighteenth chapter of Matthew in light of our failings. When we do this we cannot help but see that

[7] Ibid pp. 1253
[8] Ibid pp.1253

there is a very definite relationship between Divine forgiveness and human forgiveness.

Professor Mowrer concludes his article with the opinion that forgiveness, as such is either irrelevant or unecessary; and that the real work needs to be done between man and man. We have a lot to learn from his argument but in this we must assert the basic truth of the parable, that the King has acted; that in the life, suffering; death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has done what needed to be done to assure our forgiveness. The price has been paid, before even we asked about it. That divine forgiveness is irrelevant and unnecessary we cannot accept. "Therefore the Kingdom of heaven may be compared to "the parable begins. Forgiveness is not optional, not a social nicety relevant only to those who seek peace of heart. It is, rather the very stuff of the Kingdom of God. The parable makes clear beyond a doubt that without Forgiveness there is no Kingdom.

Secondly, the parable points out that forgiveness depends on forgiveness. The King freely and graciously forgave his servant, but there were strings attached. In failing to forgive his fellow servant, on failing to allow the Kings' forgiveness the flow through him to others, the ungrateful servant saw tht forgiveness retracted. God has taken the initiative and provided for our forgivenes. His Grace is literally free. But at the same time it is costly. While offering us grace and forgiveness God has created us free. We don't have to accept that forgiveness, we don't even have to want it. And so in the final analysis forgiveness is costly.

To Perter Jesus said "So also my heavenly Father will do to everyone of you, if you do not forgive your brother from the heart." This is the

demand of forgiveness, to forgive from the heart, and here it is that forgiveness becomes costly. First of all the cost is that we recognize a need of forgiveness. This is a hard thing to ask of us; we live by self-made standards of rightness and wrongness. Each one of us would like to feel that we are living the best possible life, each one of us is just proud enough to feel that we alone have the answers, that somehow we have the responsibility of judging our fellowmen. These feelings of self sufficiency are enough to stand us in need of forgiveness. We need go no further than our own immunity to humility and self awareness. The cost of forgiveness is that we face our guilt with integrity, existentially if you will; seeing that it is specific and personal, claiming it as our own and our own responsibility.

In the second place the cost of forgiveness is that we see that we are no better off than anyone else when it comes to guilt. This is not only a self indictment but an indictment of all mankind. It is an affirmation that our neighbor is as deserving, or undeserving, of our forgiveness as we are of God's. This, of course, is where the cost of forgiveness begins to mount. It is not too difficult to recite the prayer of forgiveness, stating in very general terms that we have offended God. But to face our neighbor, squarely, and to say "I've offended you and you've offended me--and neighter one of us deserves forgiveness from anyone" is another thing entirely. This assertion costs us a little bit of our self, a little piece of the precious antonomy of which we are so certain.

Thirdly, the cost of forgiveness, realizing all that has gone before, is to actually forgive from the heart. This is the trans-

ference of theory to practice. Here we act out our lofty theologies; here in the sphere of everyday living the word forgiveness begins to take on meaning. Perhaps the most important point of the parable is that the arena of forgiveness is not the confines of the confessional, or the confines of what we call the heart, or not even the sanctuary of our church--but life; life in its everyday commonness, its boredom and excitement, its hopes and fears. Forgiveness takes place at the very basic interaction between man and wife, between mother and child, between employer and employee. Forgiveness must occur in the very rudimentary act of addressing ourselves to the world and fellowmen each day; it cannot be limited; it must coat something.

The church is then, the community of forgiveness. It is the body of those who will to be forgiving and who have thusly become aware that they have been forgiven. The church is not the local organization of the morally superior, but the congregation of those who have faced their own guilt, and their neighbors' guilt, and who have agreed to forgive. The church is the water shed of forgiveness. It is where we unite our voices in a common prayer of confession; and in so doing are not only asking forgiveness ofGod but of each other.

The parable of the ungrateful servant is a clear statement of the cost of forgiveness. For God the price was the cross, the shame and suffering of death. For us the cost of forgiveness is integrity. Unlike the servant we must realize that we are no more worthy of forgiveness than anyone else. Unlike the servant we must recognize that God's forgiveness depends on our own active and continuing forgiving. There are no short cuts, the cost is great. We have the

option of turning forgiveness into an unnecessary, irrelevant concept--or of seeing that forgiveness is the stuff of the Kingdom of God.

May God grant us his grace to be forgiving. To forgive -- even as we are forgiven.